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## *Neoliberal Ideology and College Students Developing a Customer Orientation While in College*

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### **Abstract**

*This longitudinal study investigates changes in the extent to which students express or reject a customer orientation towards their education from their initial summer orientation to the end of their second year in college. Fifteen of the 19 items associated with a customer orientation included in the survey (N=3885, n=1085, RR= 28%) exhibited statistically significant changes, all in ways consistent with a greater expression of a customer approach. Results also indicated that while students increasingly expressed a customer orientation, overall, they continued not to express beliefs consistent with a customer approach. Implications are discussed within the framework of neoliberal ideology.*



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Many scholars and practitioners discuss the existence of a customer orientation on their campuses, though such discussions are supported largely through conceptual arguments and anecdotal experiences. Although empirical research on the pervasiveness of a customer orientation is scant, (Saunders, 2014a) found that the majority of entering first-year students rejected a customer approach to their education. Assuming the overwhelming amount of literature on students as customers has a material foundation and such an orientation actually exists, Saunder's study raises an important question: Since students are not entering college with a customer orientation, do they develop this orientation during their time in college? If the answer to this question is yes, the dissonance between that study and the extant literature may reveal a space in which higher education works to shape individuals' dispositions that, in turn, help foster consent to neoliberal ideology.

This study aims to explore this potential phenomenon by investigating changes in the extent to which students express or reject a customer orientation from their initial summer orientation, prior to enrolling in their first courses, to the end of their second year in college. The next section provides a brief background on the relationships between capitalism, neoliberal ideology, and postsecondary education. It is followed by an overview of the history of a customer orientation within postsecondary education in the United States, as well as the literature concerning the effects of this orientation on students' educational experiences. Next, to appropriately contextualize the results of this study, comes a summary of the initial study upon which this investigation builds, followed by a discussion of the methods, statistical analysis, and results of this current study. Given the limited empirical research on the topic, substantial space is devoted to a discussion of the study's results, their potential implications, and the need to build a broader body of scholarship concerning the pervasiveness of a customer orientation and the ways in which it is fostered within our colleges and universities.

While postsecondary education in the United States has historically been seen as "the great equalizer" (Torche, 2011), not all of its roles and purposes are congruent with such a benevolent ideal. Though clearly holding a minority view, scholars for over a century have been critiquing colleges and universities for helping create and justify the inequality they are allegedly relieving (Apple, 2004; Illich, 1971; Veblen, 1918/2015). Many of these scholars (e.g. Bousquet, 2008; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2014; McLaren, 2005) ground their critiques in the relationships between postsecondary education and capitalist ideology. A common example that demonstrates the intimate connection between postsecondary education, inequality, and capitalist ideology concerns the idea and practice of meritocracy.

A meritocratic understanding of education and society assumes every person has equal access to the material, social, and cultural resources necessary to be successful, resulting in the fair distribution of outcomes based solely on one's ability (Littler, 2013). Conversely, educational, economic, or social failures (imprisonment, unemployment, or, in education, not graduating from high school or going to a four-year college or university) are the result of individual flaws, and not any manifestation of institutionalized or structured oppression (racism, sexism, poverty, etc.). Meritocracy is an essential aspect of capitalist ideology, as it necessarily legitimizes the distribution of wealth, no matter how inequitable it may be. It also reinforces the idea that individuals are always in competition with each other, another central tenet of capitalism (Wolff & Resnick, 2012). Further, meritocracy demonstrates the material dimension of ideology (Rehmann, 2013); it is not only an abstract idea, but it is materially practiced in

education through standardized tests, formalized grades, and “competitive” admissions policies. These practices, in turn, help create, reinforce, and legitimize inequality.

Importantly, discussions of capitalism in education often assume it is a singular economic system. However, it is more appropriate to discuss “capitalisms,” as it has taken many different forms. The most historically prominent forms of capitalism include laissez-faire, which dominated economic policy in the United States during early 20<sup>th</sup> century; Keynesian, which rose after the Great Depression and lasted in the U.S. until early 1980s; and state sponsored, which, as seen in China, maintains the same social relations as other forms of capitalism but has a strong central state acting as the organizing body (as opposed to a board of directors or company executives) (Wolff & Resnick, 2012). The current form of capitalism in the United States and much of the world is referred to as neoliberalism, and its ideology is grounded in the omniscience of the market, the redefinition of the State from a social institution aimed at supporting citizens to an economic guarantor aimed at supporting the operation of the market, the extension of free-market rationality to the social and cultural spheres, and the redefinition of the individual from citizen to entrepreneur (Brown, 2015; Mirowski, 2013).

While scholars have chronicled the neoliberalization of postsecondary education in the United States and critiqued colleges and universities for perpetuating neoliberalism (Bousquet, 2008; Giroux, 2014; Mirowski, 2011), it may appear that neoliberal educational practices, many of which are associated with academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), should be understood primarily as institutional responses to external forces. The strongest of such forces stems from a series of governmental budget crises occurring alongside the growth of neoliberalism, during which time the state’s role was being redefined from primarily a provider of social services to guarantor of private accumulation (Mirowski, 2013). This shift in roles has resulted in per-student decreases in real-dollar state and federal support of higher education (Giroux, 2014), which in turn is said to be the cause of the prioritization revenue generation (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), dramatic increases in tuition, fees, and student loans (Giroux, 2014), and the ubiquitous reliance on part-time and adjunct faculty (Bousquet, 2008), all of which follow neoliberal ideology.

Moreover, there appears to be meaningful disagreement with the extension of neoliberal ideology within higher education, as seen through the body of scholarship critiquing the neoliberal university (e.g. Ayers, 2005; Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Hill, 2003; Mirowski, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005); political movements challenging the exploitation of part-time and adjunct faculty (Flaherty, 2015); and resistance to the increasing debt burden placed on students (Collinge, 2009; Statford, 2015). Further, there are many examples of educational practices that are antithetical to neoliberal ideology, including critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008), faculty engaging with emancipatory pedagogies (hooks, 1994, Shor, 1996), and instances of student activism (Levine & Dean, 2012). Taken together, the powerful external pressures seemingly forcing neoliberal practices and the opposition to the neoliberalization of colleges and universities suggest that postsecondary education may be *reluctantly neoliberal*.

However, colleges and universities have historically been complicit if not eager to promulgate the particular dominant form of capitalism (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), and have played an important ideological role in strengthening capitalism (Althusser, 2012). Moreover, to believe that postsecondary institutions have no alternative other than performing neoliberalism is to accept the broader neoliberal ideological dictum that “there is no alternative.” Instead of understanding neoliberalism and the neoliberalization of higher education as a natural,

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inevitable, and unavoidable consequence of external forces working to coerce institutions and their actors, we believe scholars and practitioners need to examine their own beliefs and behaviors to unearth ways in which colleges and universities are *willingly neoliberal*.

This paper is an attempt to explore the willing neoliberalization of higher education. As Eagleton (2007) discusses, ideology cannot function through coercion alone; people must consent (either actively or passively) to it. Such consent is often gained through shaping individuals' personal dispositions towards social, cultural, and economic issues, which in turn strengthens a particular understanding of "common sense" (Gramsci, 1957/1971). If all manifestations of neoliberalism in higher education are met with opposition, as the *reluctantly neoliberal* argument would suggest, it is difficult to see how such consent could be gained. Since neoliberal ideology is clearly functioning within postsecondary education in the United States (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014; Mirowski, 2011), there must be spaces in which it is fostered with limited resistance. Therefore, an important question is in what ways do colleges and universities operate uncoerced that helps create an individual disposition which fosters consent to neoliberal ideology; in what ways are they *willingly neoliberal*.

This paper attempts to answer that question by focusing on what many scholars and practitioners have argued is a widespread phenomenon throughout higher education: the student-as-customer. The customer orientation can be understood as an expression of neoliberal ideology as it prioritizes the economic relationship between the student and the institution, and, in doing so, demonstrates the extension of free-market rationality to higher education (Saunders, 2014bthis ). Because a customer orientation normalizes the commodification of educational processes, reduces the inherent creativity of education to a simple monetary exchange, and prioritizes the extrinsic rewards of personal growth and development, it may help create an individual disposition that fosters consent to its underlying neoliberalism.

### **When Students Are Understood as Customers**

A customer orientation has some attractive qualities, and was once a source of constructive developments within postsecondary education in the United States. The orientation was first claimed by students in the 1960s as a legal response (in the form of consumer protection) to suspensions and expulsions stemming from anti-war protests (Melear, 2003), as a foundation on which to legitimize calls for new course offerings (African-American Studies and Women's Studies, in particular), and demands for increased evening and weekend courses to enable working adults to participate in higher education (Johnstone, 1969). From the perspective of emancipatory scholars and practitioners, such goals are laudable, as they aided in empowering students and liberalizing the academy. Further, the belief that the 'customer is always right' was an important challenge to *in loco parentis* and general institutional approaches that treated students as if they could not make meaningful decisions on their own. Instead, institutions became more responsive to student needs as expressed by the students themselves, not as defined by the faculty, staff, or administration. In these ways, a customer orientation appeared to be an empowering educational approach that substantially helped students as they engaged with their college experience.

Yet, previous students' embracement of a customer orientation in the 1960s was not based on the premise that they were primarily defining themselves as *customers* (Johnstone,

1969; Penn & Franks, 1982), but instead was used to legitimize their rights and roles in institutional decision-making as *students*. Further, even as a customer orientation appears to accurately reflect part of the relationship between students and their college or university in that students do exchange money and engage with a variety of processes and opportunities if and only if they pay their tuition and fees (Redding, 2005; Swagler, 1978), that relationship is multifaceted and irreducible to mere monetary exchange (George, 2007). Even as there is an economic aspect to students' relationship with their institution, to define each party primarily based on their economic relationship demonstrates a neoliberal understanding of education (Saunders, 2014b).

Importantly, the positive aspects of a customer orientation manifested through a particular treatment of students by external actors and not because of the internal disposition student-customers embrace towards their own education. Further, the historically positive emancipatory manifestations of a customer orientation can, and have, become detrimental to students' education. As neoliberal ideology took hold in the United States, the power associated with a customer orientation seems to have shifted from a positive power, or "power to," based on having a more meaningful engagement in the academy, to a negative power, or "power from," based on removing requirements that enable a meaningful engagement with the academy (Brule, 2004). This "power from" reflects an individual disposition that reduces creative processes to simple exchanges, prioritizes extrinsic rewards over intrinsic goods, and that understands everything to be purchasable (Brule, 2004). Such a disposition is consistent with neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015; Mirowski, 2013).

Specifically, what in the 1960s were student demands for extending the curriculum (Penn & Franks, 1982) have morphed into demands for less academic rigor (George, 2007). Whereas the customer orientation had been invoked to increase the intellectual diversity on campus (Johnstone, 1969), now it is associated with the right not to be challenged in the classroom (Brule, 2004; Titus, 2008). Additionally, the initial movement based on students claiming authority over their own education (Johnstone, 1969) has transformed to an orientation associated with decreased engagement with academic material (George, 2007) and the right to receive good grades irrespective of the effort students' extend or the quality of their academic work (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). While there have been no empirical investigations directly exploring the impact of a customer orientation on students' educational behaviors, scholars have discussed the customer orientation as being associated with increased incidents of cheating and plagiarism (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Thompson, 2006) and decreased academic engagement and rigor (George, 2007). Beyond students' own educational behaviors, as students are understood as customers, faculty and staff are said to prioritize student satisfaction over learning (Brule, 2004; George, 2007). As Titus (2008) discussed, the learning process can be quite unsatisfying, and at times faculty and staff need to challenge deeply held beliefs and work to change educationally harmful habits. Such challenges are antithetical to a customer approach, in which the student will "always be right."

While the educational disposition of the student-customer has been widely discussed as harmful to students' educational experiences, the constructive aspects of the orientation appear to result from particular responses to students that are not unique to a customer orientation. Colleges and universities can be responsive to student needs, uphold students' rights, and not treat students as children (Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2011), all independent of prioritizing the economic relationship between students and the institution. However, within a neoliberal world,

the harmful educational manifestations resulting from a customer orientation cannot be overcome so long as that orientation holds true. In other words, the beneficial aspects of the customer-orientation can exist independently from the orientation, whereas the negative aspects appear inherent to it.

Though there are dozens of peer-reviewed articles, blog posts, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* stories, and conference presentations that discuss students as customers, an overwhelming majority of such writings lack any discussion concerning the extent to which students actually embrace this orientation (Saunders 2014b). Most literature is grounded on anecdotal information, theoretical explorations, or specious research concerning the relationships between a student and her/his institution. While such anecdotes are meaningful and many of the theoretical discussions are extremely important, without understanding the extent to which students actually express a customer orientation, most of the literature necessarily reinforces the ideological claim that students, like all other agents in a neoliberal world, are defined primarily by their economic relations. Further, without having an understanding of the pervasiveness of the customer orientation, even literature critical of the orientation has a normalizing effect, which may work to reinforce neoliberal ideology as much as challenge it.

### **Initial Study: Entering First-Year Students as Customers**

This current study builds upon Saunders (2014b) exploration of the extent to which entering first-year students expressed a customer orientation towards their education. Surveying all entering first-year college students at a large public university in the northeast United States during their summer orientation, that study found most students did not plan to engage in educational behaviors consistent with a customer approach, and did not express beliefs indicative of a customer orientation. The survey consisted of general expressions of a customer approach (i.e. “I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing” and “Concerning [institution name], I view myself primarily as a customer of the University) and specific educational behaviors scholars have argued manifest as a result of a customer approach (i.e. “I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career” and “For me, it is more important to get a good grade in the course than learn the material.”) Of the 19 items corresponding to previously identified expressions of a customer orientation, the majority of respondents expressed agreement with only four of them. Additionally, as defined by composite scores on a scale derived from the data, less than one-third of students expressed a customer orientation. Taken together, these results challenge the ideological understanding that students view themselves as customers.

As ideologies are never internally consistent, ideological expressions are often contradictory (Eagleton, 2007). Such a contradiction appears within students’ views of themselves as customers, as the majority of students in Saunders (2014a) agreed with the statement “I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing,” but disagreed with beliefs and behaviors scholars associate with viewing education as a commodity (such as only wanting to learn things that will help with a future career, getting a good grade is more important than learning the material, and because they will have paid to go to the institution, they are owed a degree). In general, students appeared to be expressing a contradictory consciousness (Cheal, 1979; Gramsci, 1971) in which they embraced the abstract views associated with a dominant ideology but rejected their specific manifestations within their own educational world.

Though many scholars have claimed the ubiquity of a customer orientation within higher education, (citation omitted) study disrupts this narrative. Yet, it is unreasonable to believe that all of those scholars wrong and are simply expressing an ideological position that does not correspond with any material reality. Instead, the dissonance between the body of scholarship that claims college students view themselves as customers and Saunders's results of entering first-year students indicating they did not express a customer orientation may suggest that a meaningful change occurs during students' collegiate experience that fosters a customer approach. By conducting a follow-up study of the same students at the same institution two years into their college experience, such dissonance, as well as the ideological functions of the university, can be explored further.

## Data and Methods

This study used a census of students ( $N=3885$ ) from the initial study who were still enrolled in the University two years after their initial entry. The same items used in the initial study were administered in the beginning of an omnibus web-based survey of second-year students at the institution, though minor word changes were made to address changes in tense (from planned behaviors in the initial survey to actual behaviors in the follow-up). Twenty-eight percent of students ( $n=1085$ ) completed the survey, a response rate that is consistent with that of many major surveys in higher education (e.g. the National Survey of Student Engagement). We only analyzed responses from students who completed all pertinent items on both surveys ( $n=739$ ), since the primary focus of the study was to examine potential change in students' responses. Women were over-represented in the final data set (women comprised 50.8% of the population, but 62.4% of respondents), and respondents appeared to be representative of the population of surveyed students with regard to race/ethnicity. Importantly, Kolek (2012) found that students who are more engaged with their institution are more likely to participate in institutional surveys. If students who express a customer orientation are less engaged with their institutions than students who reject the customer approach (Brule, 2004; George, 2007), it may be the case that students with a strong customer orientation are under-represented in this study. Stated differently, this study may underestimate the pervasiveness of a customer orientation.

This study focuses on changes in individual-item responses from Time 1, the initial survey conducted during entering first-year students' summer orientation in 2010, and Time 2, the follow-up survey conducted in March of 2012, two years after students' initial enrollment. This approach was selected prior to data analysis, as we anticipated that the initial customer orientation scale (Saunders 2014a) would no longer hold together in the Time 2 survey. As expected, confirmatory factor analysis did not validate the initial scale. We anticipated that students' approaches to specific educational behaviors were likely to change from their summer orientation to their second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). We used SPSS to conduct paired sample T tests<sup>1</sup> in order to determine if apparent differences between students' responses to individual items at Time 1 and Time 2 were statistically significant ( $p \leq .001$ ). We use Cohen's  $d$  as a measure of effect size, treating coefficients of .2 as small, .5 as medium, and .8 as large (Cohen, 1988).

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<sup>1</sup> We first ran Wilcoxon match-pairs tests appropriate for these ordinal data. However, these results are not intuitive for readers to interpret, so we present findings here as mean differences in order to facilitate comprehension. All findings were statistically significant with both parametric and nonparametric tests. Results of the nonparametric tests are available upon request.

## Results

Students' responses indicated an increased customer orientation from Time 1 to Time 2 on fifteen of the nineteen pairs of statements (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and effect size). Lower means indicate stronger agreement with a given item and higher means indicate stronger disagreement. The greatest change was for the item "For me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than to learn the material," with a mean of 3.57 at Time 1 (half way between "neither agree nor disagree" and "somewhat disagree") to a mean of 3.00 at Time 2 (neither agree nor disagree) – a change of more than one half of a point on a five-point scale. Seven other items showed medium differences (Cohen's *d* ranged from .578 to .769), and seven items showed small differences (Cohen's *d* ranged from .240 to .365) between Time 1 and Time 2. All changes were in the direction of agreeing with statements consistent with a customer orientation.

At Time 2, seven items had mean values of less than 3.00, indicating agreement with those items on our five-point scale. This is an increase from the results found at Time 1, at which students agreed with only four items. Respondents indicated the highest levels of agreement with the statements, "My professors should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next letter grade" (mean = 2.05), "The financial returns on my education are not very important to me" (reverse-coded mean = 2.07), and "I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing" (mean = 2.42). The lowest level of agreement were with the statements, "While at [institution name] I am trying to take the easiest courses possible (mean = 4.02), "Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career" (mean = 3.64), and "It is more important for me to have a high paying career than one I really like" (mean = 3.58). Most notable among these results is the simultaneous agreement with some items associated with a customer orientation, and disagreement with others. We speculate as to the cause for these seemingly contradictory responses in the following section.

### **Developing a Customer Orientation while in College**

Similar to the students' rejection of a customer orientation expressed prior to taking any courses, this study has shown that students continue to rebuff such an orientation after two years at the institution. However, they have increasingly expressed beliefs and behaviors consistent with a customer approach. This is best expressed through the item, "for me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than to learn the material," which saw the largest change from students' summer orientation to their second year and shows a disturbing shift in which learning becomes a secondary priority in students' curricular experience. Similarly disturbing from an educational perspective is the extent to which students increasingly agreed that they "only want to learn things in their courses that will help them in their future careers," and that "if they could get a well-paying job without being in college, they would not be at the institution." In total, fifteen of the 19 items associated with a customer orientation exhibited statistically significant changes during students' first two years at the University, and all items changed in ways consistent with a greater expression of a customer approach to education. Acknowledging the limitations of drawing conclusions solely based on statistical significance, examining effect sizes reinforces the conclusion that substantial changes in the extent to which students express a customer orientation are occurring.

Table 1

*Differences in “Student as Customer” Items*

Survey item	Time 1		Time 2		<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
For me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than to learn the material	3.57	1.051	3.00	1.196	739	12.029	738	<.001	.886
I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career	3.27	1.285	2.70	1.298	739	10.449	738	<.001	.769
If I could get a well-paying job without going to college, I would not be here	3.70	1.236	3.20	1.323	727	9.515	726	<.001	.706
Concerning [Institution Name], I think of myself primarily as a customer of the University	3.37	1.033	2.92	1.230	735	9.134	734	<.001	.674
It is part of my professors’ job to make sure I pass my courses	3.48	1.128	3.06	1.270	653	7.838	652	<.001	.614
It is essential that I major in something that will help me make a lot of money <sup>1</sup>	3.62	1.178	3.23	1.267	716	8.038	715	<.001	.601
My professors should round up my final course grade one or two points if I am close to the next letter grade	2.39	1.060	2.05	1.042	720	7.845	719	<.001	.585
Because I will have paid to attend [Institution Name], the University will owe me a degree	3.84	1.096	3.45	1.275	690	7.585	689	<.001	.578
While at [Institution Name], I am trying to take the easiest courses possible <sup>2</sup>	4.22	.804	4.02	1.034	719	4.888	718	<.001	.365
It is more important for me to have a high paying career than one I really like	3.77	1.108	3.58	1.197	721	4.410	720	<.001	.329
For me, college is more of a place to get training for a specific career than to gain a general education	3.00	1.110	2.78	1.219	688	4.227	687	<.001	.323
The financial returns are not very important to me (recode)	2.26	1.024	2.07	.980	715	4.208	714	<.001	.315
If I cannot earn a lot of money after I graduate, I will have wasted my time at [Institution Name]	3.90	1.064	3.71	1.159	684	3.943	683	<.001	.301
If I cannot get a good job after I graduate, I should be able to have some of my tuition and fees refunded	3.59	1.168	3.40	1.262	691	3.472	690	.001	.264
I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing	2.59	1.718	2.42	1.150	743	3.275	742	.001	.240
As long as I complete all of my assignments, I deserve a good grade in a course	2.87	1.064	2.78	1.162	734	1.893	733	.059	NA
Developing my critical thinking skills is only important if it helps me with my career	3.68	1.125	3.64	1.274	722	.843	721	.400	NA
The main purpose of my college education should be maximizing my ability to earn money	3.34	1.211	3.42	1.202	685	-1.572	684	.116	NA
For the most part, education is something I receive, not something I create	3.45	1.049	3.42	1.113	681	.546	680	.585	NA

<sup>1</sup>I will only major in something that will help me earn a lot of money

<sup>2</sup>While at [Institution Name], I am going to try to take the easiest courses possible

We want to be clear that we are not suggesting higher education should be focused purely on intrinsic goals, and it is an indicator of privilege not to have to concern oneself with future economic conditions. We believe particularly for working class students, future employment is part of the emancipatory potential of higher education (albeit ideally in a different economic system), though such potential cannot be reduced to securing a job. Instead, as Saunders (2014b) argues, when the college experience is defined primarily in terms of future economic achievement, the emancipatory possibilities of postsecondary education are reduced. As such, our results showing increased movements towards narrowly-defined career goals should be troubling for all those concerned with critical education.

One may expect that as students continue through college and focus more on courses within their major, they will prioritize career-related learning. Similarly, given the substantial cost of attending the university, it may be reasonable to question the economic rationality of attending the institution if other options are available. Yet, to see educational activities becoming increasingly reduced to career training and the college experience progressively understood primarily in economic terms indicates a narrowing of the role, purpose, and goals of postsecondary education from the those of which it is often attributed. Importantly, such narrowing is consistent with the assumptions and logic of neoliberal ideology.

The results of this study clearly show students increasingly expressed a customer orientation, as seen through the magnitude and direction of changes in students' responses, which is consistent with the literature on students as customers. However, the results also indicate that students, overall, continue not to express a customer orientation in scope or magnitude consistent with neoliberal ideology, a finding that is in tension with the existing literature on the topic but that is consistent with Saunders (2014a) initial findings. That literature is largely grounded on conceptual arguments detailing the power of neoliberal ideology and anecdotal information concerning its manifestations within postsecondary education. Just as Levin and Aliyeva (2015) challenge such an approach towards scholarship on neoliberalism and faculty life that claims professors engage in neoliberal behaviors and express neoliberal beliefs simply by working in the neoliberal university, the results of this study demonstrate the need to have a more nuanced understanding of the influence of neoliberal ideology on college students.

The need for a nuanced understanding is reinforced by the results showing students continuing to express a contradictory consciousness that was found in the initial study. Specifically, students agreed with the general manifestations of a customer orientation, particularly in thinking of their college education as a product they are purchasing, but disagreed with the material practices associated with that approach. This study focused solely on the customer orientation, so it is unknown how alternative orientations may relate to that of the customer. However, the contradictions found in this study point to a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the customer orientation, which begs for further investigation. Contradictions are inherent within all ideologies (Eagleton, 2007), and students' contradictory expressions indicate an ideological foundation undergirding their educational beliefs and behaviors. At the same time, ideological actors and institutions attempt to alleviate these contradictions, as such contradictions present a foundation upon which to build resistance towards the larger ideology. Since students increasingly expressed both the general manifestation of a customer orientation and the personal beliefs and behaviors consistent with that approach, it appears that their college experience helps attenuate the contradiction between simultaneously expressing and rejecting aspects of a

customer orientation and create a consciousness more consistent with a neoliberal approach to education.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these results alone cannot indicate if higher education is furthering or stemming the tide of neoliberalism, i.e., that without educational interventions, students would express a customer orientation to an even greater extent. After all, if neoliberal ideology is as powerful as some suggest, how could colleges and universities resist it? Further, given the series of legislated neoliberal assaults on postsecondary education, such as what has occurred in 2015 in Wisconsin, where the governor and legislature have supported the *de facto* elimination of tenure within the state system of higher education and have cut hundreds of millions of dollars from the education budget (Strauss, 2015), it may be that institutions have little choice other than promulgating a neoliberal approach to higher education.

Yet, it is difficult to imagine how one could rationalize fostering a customer orientation in ways similar to that of other manifestations of neoliberalism on campus. Unlike increases in tuition and fees, the amplified reliance on part-time and adjunct faculty, changes to systems of tenure, and the prioritization of revenue generation, there are no external material conditions that force the institution to foster a customer orientation. As discussed previously, colleges and universities can realize the constructive aspects of a customer orientation independent of promulgating a customer approach and necessarily fostering the negative educational beliefs and behaviors inherent to it. It may be that certain neoliberal educational practices, such as placing substantial weight on course evaluations in promotion and tenure decisions, encourage institutional actors (in this case, faculty) to approach students as if they were customers. In such cases, faculty lessening the academic rigor of their courses and focusing on satisfaction over learning might be reasonable responses to an educational world that treats course evaluations as the primary indicator of teacher quality. Yet, to normalize this approach is to remove much agency from faculty, homogenize all faculty, teaching, and motivations across institutions and disciplines, reinforce the belief that neoliberal ideology necessarily dominates faculty work, and suggest that students' beliefs and behaviors follow directly from the pedagogical approaches of their faculty. Similarly, while institutions may have to prioritize recreation centers, apartment-style housing, and luxurious facilities to attract students in a "competitive market," and may prioritize career-related curricular and co-curricular activities, to necessarily associate a customer orientation with those material structures is to overdetermine the relationship between ideology and the material world. That is, just because there are instances in which individual and institutional practices can be seen to correspond with a customer approach, those practices alone do not necessarily determine the role and orientation students will have.

Of course, the material world provides a foundation upon which ideological structures are created, the ways in which meaning is shaped, and how beliefs become entrenched in our common sense (Rehmann, 2013). It could be that meaningful changes occurred within the state, country, and/or world from the initial survey to the time the follow-up was administered that would change students' approach towards their education. It could also be that as students get closer to graduation, they incur increasingly large amounts of loans whose inevitable repayment leads to a shift in educational priorities. However, just as it this study has shown it is incorrect to believe that because neoliberal ideology is dominant in the United States, all students will view themselves as customers, it is also misguided to believe that external conditions necessarily determine students' educational orientations and everything that occurs within postsecondary institutions.

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As is the case with the vast majority of quantitative research about college students, the absence of a control group greatly limits our ability to make causal claims (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). That being acknowledged, because one can reasonably assume that while in college students may receive the strongest messages and understandings of education from the institution in which they are enrolled (as opposed to popular culture, family members, and peers which may be the strongest influence prior to enrolling in higher education), it is reasonable to at least partially attribute changes in students' educational orientation to the college experience. Further, because the customer orientation corresponds to a neoliberal understanding of the role of the student and her/his relationship with the institution, and since this orientation intensifies as the student continues to engage with the institution, it is also reasonable to assume that the institution is performing its ideological role long ascribed to it.

### **Disrupting the Neoliberalization of Postsecondary Education**

Though previous literature has discussed the negative educational implications of a customer orientation, little attention has been given to the ideological characteristics of a customer approach to education. That is, scholars have yet to discuss the ways in which a customer orientation helps create an individual disposition that fosters consent to the larger neoliberal ideology. To be sure, students do not have a monolithic identity, and ideological tactics do not necessarily impact all people in identical ways (Eagleton, 2007). However, there appears to be some clear connections between embracing a customer orientation towards one's education and consenting to neoliberal principles beyond postsecondary education. Similar to the ways in which meritocracy creates the conditions in which the impacts of neoliberal policies and practices are necessary legitimate, the prioritization of the economic relationship and outcomes of one's college experience normalizes the market-based reduction of multidimensional social relations and creative processes. Combined with the overall influence of neoliberalism on the collective common sense (Brown, 2015), limiting the emancipatory potential of higher education and replacing it with a stark reinforcement of neoliberal ideology can have as damaging impacts outside of postsecondary education as the customer orientation has within it.

The continued lack of expression of a customer approach (which is not to be confused with resistance to that approach, as resistance suggests a more active process than these data can support) shows that, contrary to neoliberal ideology, a customer orientation is not a natural part of higher education. Instead, like neoliberalism itself, a customer orientation develops through a series of experiences and engagement with particular material conditions and discursive representations that make it appear as natural, rational, legitimate, and universal (Eagleton, 2007). Prioritizing non-curricular facilities, the magnitude of tuition and fees, and the normalization of indebtedness help create the material foundation for the customer orientation. Treating the syllabus as a contract (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002) and lessening of non-monetary "costs" of education (George, 2007) demonstrate a discursive representation of the institution as service provider and the student as customer. Given such an institutional context, it is unsurprising that students increasingly express beliefs consistent with a customer orientation as they progress through their collegiate experience.

This study has particular relevance for those concerned with critical education, broadly defined. While its methods present a number of limitations, by using survey research this study "speaks the language" of the dominant higher education community (Wells et al., 2015). In doing so, it can equip educators with a resource to push back against institutional discourse

which presents students as customers. Additionally, it presents compelling data for primary and secondary educators to disrupt the dominant neoliberal discourse concerning a narrowly-focused, career-based postsecondary educational orientation that to this point has been taken for granted. Together, our hope is that this study can be another tool for critical educators in their resistance towards the neoliberalization of postsecondary education.

Importantly, the results of this study show that we should not assume an over-determined relationship between neoliberal ideology and students' educational beliefs and behaviors. Instead, and given the potential educational harm stemming from a customer orientation, postsecondary education researchers must engage in further empirical investigations concerning the pervasiveness of such an educational approach. Like all single-institution studies, the extent to which these findings are directly generalizable to other colleges and universities is not known. Future research should investigate the pervasiveness of a customer orientation at different institutional types and geographic locations. Further, the results of this study highlighted the complex and, at times, contradictory nature of students' beliefs about their college education, revealing areas of nuance that were likely undetected with the survey measures utilized therein. Investigations that use qualitative approaches will be better suited to uncover and explore such nuance. Lastly, while this study has shown an increased expression of a customer orientation as students engage with the institution, by design it cannot show causality, and it did not explore institutional actions that may contribute to or work against the development of a customer orientation. The field of higher education would be well served if future research attempts to build upon this current study, move beyond its limitations, and continue to build an argument that challenges the neoliberalization of postsecondary education in general, and the customer orientation, in particular.

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